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## **Welcome and Introduction**

Congratulations!

You are now an EPA STAR Graduate Fellow. “STAR” is an acronym for Science to Achieve Results and it reflects the Environmental Protection Agency’s commitment to excellence in science and in its use as an indispensable tool in environmental decision making. The STAR Graduate Fellows program is extremely competitive. In an average year, we approve only one in twelve eligible applications. We are committed to the educational and professional success of those individuals we fund and we want you to make the most of this fellowship and the opportunities it provides. We understand that there are confusing aspects to the fellowship and have produced this Handbook to familiarize you with the STAR Graduate Fellowship Program and its requirements.

## **Purpose of the Program**

The STAR Graduate Fellowship Program was established in 1995 to encourage promising and committed students to obtain advanced degrees and pursue careers in environmentally related fields. This goal is consistent with the mission of EPA, which is to provide leadership in the nation's environmental science, research, education, assessment, restoration, and preservation efforts. Both the public and private sectors will need a steady stream of well-trained environmental specialists if our society is to meet the environmental challenges of the future. While there is no obligation to EPA beyond performing to the best of your ability in your studies and research, we sincerely hope that graduates will dedicate themselves to a meaningful environmental career.

## **Provisions of the Program**

The fellowship provides a maximum of \$34,000 per year of support, divided as follows:

- C up to \$12,000 per year for tuition and academic fees;
- C an annual expense of up to \$5,000, to be paid directly to the institution;
- C and monthly stipend of \$1,417, paid directly to the student.

Additional information about these categories of funds is provided below under “*General Information About the Fellowship.*”

## **Duration of the Program**

Support for students in a masters degree program is limited to two years duration. Students in doctoral programs are eligible for up to three years of support. The fellowship must be terminated when the degree is conferred. In certain situations, EPA may grant an unfunded extension of up to one year, to enable a student to complete their research. These “no-cost” extensions are not automatic and will only be granted on a case-by-case basis.

## **Initial Award Process**

You will be notified by your Project Officer that you are a finalist for the fellowship. If you are still interested in being a STAR Fellow, the Project Officer will request the additional information needed by EPA to make an award. The Project Officer prepares a recommendation for funding package and ensures that it is submitted to the Grants Administration Division. The Grant Specialist processes the award and it is signed by the Award Official. Once the package is signed, EPA is required by law to hold it for five working days in case your congressional representative wishes to notify you of the offer. After the five day congressional hold, the Grants Specialist mails the award package to the applicant for review, acceptance, and signature. When you receive this package, you must sign it, make a copy, and return it or the award is not official.

Your award package contains three important documents. They are:

- C **EPA Form 5770-8: Fellowship Assistance Agreement** -- this is the official offer of award. It is signed by the EPA Award Official in the Grants Operations Branch, who is the only person who may officially offer such assistance. To become effective, the Fellow must sign where indicated, make a copy to retain, and return the original to EPA, as directed in the package. Please review this document carefully for correctness. Should you find any mistakes, include an explanation as a cover note, making your acceptance contingent upon the correction of those items.

The Agreement contains several useful pieces of information:

- S The Assistance ID Number ("U#####-01-0") – This is your award number. Please remember to include this number on every piece of correspondence regarding your Fellowship. Only the first seven digits apply. The "01" means that you are in the first budget period. This number will not change during the life of the Fellowship. The "-0" means that the agreement has not been amended. As we add funds to your agreement or modify it in other ways, this number will reflect those actions.
- S Block 5(a) and 5(c) – Name and Phone Number of Project Officer. Please note and record these. The Project Officer is your primary contact and you will need to know how to reach him or her.
- S Blocks 12(a) and 12(b) Name and Phone Number of Grant Specialist. Note and record these. The grant specialist is the individual in the Grants Administration Division who maintains your official project file. Should you need official information about your award, you will need to contact this individual.
- C **Fellowship Assistance Agreement Terms and Conditions** – this document lays out reporting requirements, legal limitations, and other conditions of the award. You must be

aware of these conditions before you sign to accept the award. Signing the award obligates you to abide by these terms.

- C **EPA Form 5770-7: Award Activation Notice** – this document is needed by the Agency’s financial management office to initiate payment. To complete the Activation Notice, follow the instructions on the form. Consult your Fellowship Agreement, Item 10, and type or neatly print the Payee Title and Address that appears there on the Activation Notice in the block, “Mailing Address for Institution Checks.” EPA cannot send payment for Tuition and Fees to the educational institution until this information is provided. This Notice must be signed by the same “sponsor” whose name appears on the Fellowship Assistance Agreement, usually the student’s graduate advisor. You must insure that the Activation Notice is also sent to the Grants Specialist referenced on the notice in Washington DC.

Upon receipt of the Activation Notice and the signed Fellowship Assistance Agreement, your Grant Specialist will forward these items to the Financial Management Center in Las Vegas, Nevada so that you and the school can be paid.

### **Renewing the Agreement**

Each Spring, you will be notified by your Project Officer that you must submit updated information to renew your fellowship. This information consists of updated transcripts, financial information, a progress and status report from the advisor, and additional data. Once you submit this information, your Project Officer will prepare a recommendation for funding and submit that to the Grants Administration Division. You can expect to receive your renewal offer within eight to twelve weeks of the time it is submitted to the Project Officer. You must sign and return this offer before it can take effect.

### **Terminating the Agreement**

If you are due to graduate before the end of your fellowship award period, it is you who must initiate the termination process. Contained in your initial award package was a Termination Notice. You must complete this and submit it to the address given before the end date of the award. At the same time, you must submit a final technical report to your Project Officer. At present, this report consists of the following information:

- C a copy of your dissertation, if available. If not yet available, include a progress report cosigned by your advisor, any information that is available, and an estimated date of completion and graduation.
- C a bibliography and copies of all publications that resulted at least in part from the fellowship.

- C the name and date of the degree conferred.
- C plans for future employment, with contacts, if available
- C personal contact information after the termination date.

## **Finding Your Way Through EPA**

The National Center for Environmental Research (NCER) has the primary responsibility to solicit, review, recommend, and manage the research grants and fellowship programs. NCER is a component of EPA's Office of Research and Development and is located in Washington, D.C.

The Grants Administration Division (GAD) is the organization within EPA that is empowered to award grants and fellowships. Located in Washington, D.C., this division is responsible for issuing, modifying, and terminating all grants, fellowships, and other assistance, except for those originating in one of EPA's ten regional offices. GAD is responsible for developing all Agency assistance policies, and for enforcing compliance with those policies.

The Financial Management Center in Las Vegas, Nevada (FMC-LV), is responsible for the financial administration of contracts, grants, cooperative agreements, and fellowships issued by EPA headquarters.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

Within EPA, there are three individuals who play key roles in managing your fellowship. You may be confused about who these people are and what they do, but it is your responsibility -- and in your best interest -- to know who these people are and what they can and cannot be expected to do for you.

**Project Officer (PO):** The Project Officer is located in the National Center for Environmental Research (NCER). This is probably the person who notified you that you were a fellowship finalist. The PO is your primary contact for all matters except those relating directly to the issuance of checks and is the first person you should contact if you have questions. The PO is the one who should tell you when it is time to submit renewal paperwork, abstracts, or other technical or programmatic information during your fellowship.

**What You Can Expect From Your Project Officer:** PO's are assigned somewhat at random, so it is likely that your PO will have no expertise in your area. Some PO's have technical backgrounds and some do not, but all are expected to be expert in the workings of the fellowship program. The PO should think of you as a client, an individual whose education is important to them. Since most PO's have numerous

fellowships to manage, it may not be realistic to expect them to instantly recognize your project title or to know without prompting the details of your situation. However, they should immediately recognize your name and have quick access to the particulars of your curriculum, research, and fellowship. You can expect them to provide you with ample notification of due dates and sufficient guidance to accomplish necessary administrative activities. You can expect them to provide immediate answers to basic questions (that are not already covered in this handbook) and to get back to you within a reasonable time if a particular question requires additional research. It is fair to expect a PO to answer your calls or e-mails within 24 hours if they are in town and on duty. If they are not available when you call, you can expect them to answer within 48 hours after their return. You can expect them to process your renewals within three weeks of submission or to provide a reasonable explanation for any delays. PO's should maintain complete and up-to-date files that include records of all relevant conversations or mail exchanges, as well as official records. You can expect them to behave professionally and competently at all times.

**What Your Project Officer Can Expect From You:** Your PO can expect you to provide required documentation in a timely way. If you plan to be out of the country or otherwise difficult to reach for an extended time, you should notify your PO and provide an alternative contact, in case problems arise or information is required. Your PO can request periodic informal updates on the status of your research and expects an annual written status report from you and your advisor. If you are having difficulties, your PO needs to know about them as soon as possible so that he or she can assist you in solving them. Your PO can expect you to read and remember the requirements of your award and to comply with them at all times. Your PO expects that you will consult this handbook for information first before calling to ask questions. You are expected to maintain a file of your fellowship materials, including this handbook, and to be certain that you understand all relevant rules and limitations before you take action, such as purchasing equipment or traveling abroad. You are expected to attend the annual STAR Fellows Conference unless you are specifically excused. Should your name, address, or fellowship status change, you are expected to notify your PO as soon as possible. At the end of your fellowship, you are expected to provide a complete and accurate final report, as directed by the terms of your award and any clarification provided by your PO.

**Grant Specialist (GS):** Although you may never have any direct contact with your GS, this person is in many ways the most important one to you. The GS is the one who processes your application, submits the award offer, issues all modifications to your fellowship, and notifies you, the PO and the finance office of relevant actions.

**What You Can Expect From Your Grant Specialist:** Your GS is assigned based on the state shown in the permanent address block on your application. When communicating with your GS, you must always refer to your award number, as the GS will not recognize you by name and their automated files are stored and sorted by award number. Each GS is responsible for hundreds of projects, so do not be disappointed if

they do not know who you are when you call. The GS is an expert in the workings of fellowships and grants, but will not know or particularly care about your particular fellowship except insofar as it is all in order. You can expect the GS to process your award and modifications efficiently, to retain official records, and to notify appropriate individuals of actions taken. Your GS should be respectful at all times and if your question is one that should properly be directed to them, they should be able to answer it immediately or to obtain information in a reasonable amount of time and to convey it in a helpful manner.

**What Your Grant Specialist Can Expect From You:** The GS expects you to read your award and accompanying documents thoroughly before signing and returning them. You are expected to follow all instructions given in the award and modification packages and to comply with all conditions of the award. The GS expects you to consult first with your PO on questions pertaining to the fellowship before asking them for assistance. Should your name, address, or fellowship status change, your GS must be notified as soon as possible.

**Financial Officer (FO):** Unless otherwise notified, your FO is Dot Riley, of the Financial Management Center in Las Vegas, Nevada. Dot issues the checks for all of the STAR fellowships. In addition, you will submit your termination notice to Dot when you complete the fellowship.

**What You Can Expect From The Financial Officer:** Since Dot is responsible for the financial management of over 300 fellowships, as well as numerous other activities, it is not reasonable to expect her to know who you are when you call or to look up your fellowship number. You may, however, expect her to be an expert on financial management and to have sound advice about how to handle any funding difficulties that may arise. You can expect Dot to respond to your inquiries in a timely way and to correct any funding anomalies that arise. Once Dot receives the proper paperwork, she should issue all checks by the fifth of the month in which they are due. She should also notify you of any problems that she encounters. Dot should notify you when you are nearing the end of your fellowship to alert you that there will be no more stipend checks issued. You can expect Dot to conduct her work in a responsible and efficient manner.

**What The Financial Officer Can Expect From You:** Dot must be notified immediately of any changes in address, name, or other status in your fellowship that might affect issuance of checks. If we have over or underpaid your tuition or fees, Dot and your PO should be notified as soon as possible. If it is necessary to call Dot regarding a funding problem, you are expected to provide all of the necessary information in a coherent and effective way and to treat Dot with respect as she attempts to solve your problem. When you are within a few months of completing your fellowship, you are expected to send Dot a termination notice, as described in your award package.

## **General Information Regarding the Fellowship**

**Annual Conference:** Each year, EPA sponsors a conference for the STAR Fellows that provides an opportunity for Fellows to meet and exchange ideas, present their projects and results to date, grapple with real-world environmental decision making issues, and meet influential officials from EPA and other public, private, and non-governmental organizations. Fellows are expected to attend these conferences and to present posters. You must obtain express permission in advance from your project officer if you wish to miss the conference.

**Changing Advisors:** A change in advisor is taken seriously by EPA. Any request to change advisor will be studied carefully. We would expect to receive a statement from the advisor as to the advisability of the proposed change before making a decision to approve.

**Changing Institutions:** To justify a change in institution, EPA requires a detailed explanation of the change being requested, the proposed new advisor, proof of acceptance into the new program and institution, an explanation of any project changes that would result, a statement from the current advisor, and an explanation of any delays that the transfer would cause in the expected date of graduation. Approval is granted on a case by case basis.

**Changing Projects:** Although Fellows are selected in part on the basis of the project and program area in which they propose, EPA understands that on occasion, it may be in the student's best interest to make a change. With an appropriate and sufficient justification and concurrence from the project officer, we may agree to approve such a change. Approval is not automatic, however, and is granted on a case by case basis.

**Computer Purchases:** Fellows may use their expense budget to purchase computers, subject to approval by their project officer. To obtain this approval, you must submit a detailed justification for the purchase, including the specifications and peripherals required and why. EPA requires three estimates, either directly from the proposed vendors, or from the fellow with a contact name and phone number for each vendor. If the fellow wishes to purchase a unit that is not the lowest price, we will need a justification for the extra expense. Should you desire a unit that is not available from more than one source (such as a Dell or Gateway computer), please include your reasoning for desiring that specific make or model.

### **Deferrals:**

EPA no longer allows deferrals for any reason. Anyone who accepts the STAR Fellowship must be prepared to begin in the Fall term of the year in which they are accepted. Once accepted, the fellowship must be continued until completion or terminated.

**Eligibility:** Applicants must be citizens of the United States or its territories or possessions, or be lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence. Resident aliens must include their green card number in their pre-application. This number may be verified with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Students do not need to be enrolled in or formally accepted in a full-time graduate program at the time they apply for a fellowship, but they must



produce proof of enrollment or acceptance before the fellowship is awarded. Students must be pursuing a masters or doctoral degree in an environmentally related field of specialization (see fields of specialization below). Students who have completed more than two years in the masters program or four years in the doctoral program are not eligible.

**Foreign Travel:** Foreign travel is not prohibited under this fellowship. However, EPA provides only \$5,000 per year in expense money, some of which must be reserved to attend the annual STAR Conference.

Effective in the Summer of 2000, all proposed foreign research projects must be approved in advance by the Department of State. To obtain this approval, you must submit a description of the project to your project officer. This description should include a brief explanation of what you plan to do, specifically where the research will be done, why it will be done in that country, how long it is expected to take, and how much each trip will cost, and how often you expect to travel there. You may not travel until you are assured by your PO that the project is approved.

Fellows are required to abide by the provisions of the Fly America Act, as mentioned in the terms and conditions of your award. This Act requires individuals who are flying on U.S. federal dollars to travel only on American carriers except in some extremely unlikely situations. In our experience, it is virtually impossible to be excused from the provisions of that Act. Cost may not be cited as a justification for ignoring the Act. Failure to comply with the Fly America Act constitutes noncompliance with the terms of your award and may result in early termination, criminal liability, or both.

**Funding:** The following section describes the process and limitations of providing tuition and fee, expense, and stipend payments:

**Tuition and Fees:** EPA pays the tuition and academic fees directly to the institution at the beginning of each term. In cases where the annual tuition and fees exceed the allowable \$12,000, the student is responsible for the additional amounts. EPA does not pay for health insurance as an academic fee, even if such insurance is required by the institution. However, students may pay for health insurance from their expense budget. Any inadvertent overpayments of tuition or fees in a given year must either be returned to EPA or deducted from the amount requested in the following year.

**Expense Budget:** The expense budget is paid directly to the institution, to be made available to the student as needed for necessary expenses. Allowable expenses include items and activities for the direct benefit of the student's education, such as health insurance, books, supplies, equipment, assistants, and travel to research sites and technical meetings. This support is dispersed by EPA on an annual basis until the termination of the fellowship. Expense money may accumulate from year to year, but all unspent expense money must be returned to EPA at the conclusion of the fellowship.

The research proposed may be conducted outside the United States. However, EPA allows only \$5,000 for all expenses, including travel.

Institutions are discouraged from charging an administrative fee for managing this account. However, if they insist, they may charge a fee not to exceed 2% of the total expense budget. This arrangement is strictly between the student and the university.

**Stipend:** Stipends are paid directly to the students on a monthly basis. The monthly check should arrive during the first five days of the month, at the address designated by the student. The student is responsible for notifying appropriate EPA personnel of any address changes. (See below under Roles and Responsibilities.) The stipend is paid each month that the fellow is enrolled as a full time student, either taking a full course load or pursuing research on a full time basis. At its discretion, the student's institution may supplement a Fellow's stipend from institutional funds in accordance with the supplementation policy of the institution.

Students are encouraged to participate in the Electronic Funds Transfer program, in which the stipend is electronically transferred directly to the student's bank account each month.

**Other Assistance:** Students are not prohibited from receiving other assistance during the period of this award, but they may not receive any additional FEDERAL assistance. Grants, fellowships, or scholarships from private or other university sources are allowed, but the fellow does have to account for this additional assistance.

**Outside Employment:** Outside employment is not specifically prohibited under the STAR Fellowship, although the primary purpose of the award is to free the student from the pressures of having to work to support themselves while they conduct their studies. Students will be expected to reveal the sources of outside employment, including the number of hours worked, amount of payment, and source of funds.

**Ownership of Equipment:** All equipment purchased under this fellowship belongs to the student in perpetuity. It is not the property of EPA and cannot be claimed by the university.

**Purchases Over \$1,000:** EPA does not closely monitor most charges from the expense budget. We prefer instead to leave that between the student and the university. However, we do require approval for any single charge of \$1,000 or more, such as a computer, microscope, plane ticket, etc.

